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Brand faithfulness and economic crisis. Brand and quality are important but price counts for more

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Abstract

Can the world and the system of meaning that create brands directed towards consumers, their lifestyles and their values be questioned in the light of the current economic crisis?

This essay aims to analyze the relationship between brand faithfulness and the economic crisis, assessing whether there have been changes in the way people follow brands caused by the difficulties consumers find themselves faced with today. More specifically, it will attempt to answer the following questions: over the three-year period 2009-2011,

- have brands maintained their importance as a factor when purchasing consumer goods?
- have consumers stayed faithful to the brands they always purchased before?
- have the consumers stayed faithful to the brands with regard to the various retail sectors?

These questions take their place within a much broader setting which we will analyze in order to determine whether brand faithfulness is weaker now than before.

In the first section of the essay we will take make in-depth examination of consumption dynamics, with particular focus on the habits and customs of the families interviewed. The first issue is who does the shopping, then what types of goods are purchased and finally which criteria have the greatest influence on the choice of outlet. This will allow us to establish who it is who is responsible for the family purchases and then endeavour to understand what it is that families place most importance on when choosing shops.

Our reflections will then focus on the main point of this essay. After analyzing which factors have the greatest influence on the choice of products – with the aim of determining the level of importance of the role brand plays – we will take a closer look at brand faithfulness in the consumers interviewed. Our aim in doing so is to determine whether the individuals interviewed are change-oriented or prefer not to change their choices of products and brands. This will allow us to understand whether brand plays a crucial role in consumption dynamics, pushing consumers towards change, or whether, on the contrary, habit, being sure of what one is buying, is what really counts.
Keywords: consumer faithfulness, brand faithfulness.

Introduction: The brand faithfulness

The goods themselves have by now lost their role as the focal point of the consumer market; their value in terms of the use consumers get out of them has moved over to allow the symbolic dimension and system of meaning generated by the object to hold sway. Therefore, a web of principles determining, modifying and characterizing the lifestyles and social relations enjoyed by individuals has woven around the goods.

This process of dematerializing consumption (Lipovetsky, 2006; Fabris, 2010; Fabris, Minestroni, 2004; Semprini, 2006) and markets has become the key characteristic of the current market offer, which is today built around the symbolic density of goods, thus creating a new value: the value of image, in other words the possibility to deliberately create a veritable symbolic projection that the object gives substance to.

The traditional values of materiality and functionality lose importance and "what the good represents", both for the individual and for society at large, takes shape as the engine driving consumption. The empathy aroused by the product and its brands is not always directly proportional to the use value or exchange value of the object in itself, but these aspects run along separate tracks (Viviani, 2012). The close bond between the product and the lifestyle of the consumer and how it is represented in the social sphere push consumers to search for the meaning the object carries with it on the market. Around this meaning revolve a group of values and ideals and symbology that often detaches itself from the functionality of the object in itself.

In this case brand plays an important role as it allows products to be semanticized, thereby creating a profile by which they are recognized (very often dictated by the attempt to seem unique) or attributing new semantics to products that seem old or with little sex appeal, which perception may be caused by a change in the perception of certain values and the meanings they carry[1] (Lipovetsky, 2010; Semprini, 2006).

A brand carries with it tangible meanings (such as the quality of the product) and, contemporaneously, symbolic meanings such as feelings, love and projection. A veritable brand identity arises, one that promotes these ideal values, which can be repositioned according to the needs of the context, the consumers and their individual tastes and styles (Lipovetsky, 2010; Minestroni, 2002). These values are linked to the representation of the object, its symbolism and the meaning it takes on in the eyes of consumers, therefore they appear to be more closely linked to the immaterial dimension of the product (for example the brand) than to its materiality (for example the functionality and/or the price).

Brand faithfulness (Dalli, Romani, 2003) constitutes a highly important dimension that has most difficulty establishing a dialogue with consumers when it comes to everyday objects.

With the aim of first promoting an attitude of faithfulness among consumers and then establishing a concrete process of loyalization, companies have, over the years, come up with programmes to improve their customer relations as well as individual marketing strategies. The notion behind these mechanisms is the idea that it is possible to increase consumer faithfulness to the product; however the postmodern consumer and the current economic crisis seriously question this perspective.

In the first case, consumers' choices today seem particularly fluid and mobile; this instability is dictated by a continual search for both emotions and certainties in their purchases (Viviani, 2012). However, that is not all.

Precariousness and uncertainty in consumption patterns would seem to be increasing at that same rate as worry about the current economic crisis. The search for bargains prevails over brands, therefore focus on price would seem to hold a greater attraction for consumers than the emotional dimension conveyed by the brand (Dalli, Romani, 2003; Bohlen *et al.,* 2010; Collesei, 2011), in the light of a rethinking of the quantities and meanings of present-day consumption (Bosio *et al.,* 2011).

In a study presented to the "In-Store&Consumer Forum" in 2009, *Nielsen Italia* stressed the fact that crisis-time consumers (Bohlen *et al.,* 2010) had downsized their purchases, prioritizing them according to cost and importance.

[1] As Minestroni illustrates effectively (2002), at the beginning of the Eighties, the *Mulino Bianco* baked goods company had enormous market success by presenting itself as the essence of simplicity and natural goodness. Today the same terms and same values are oriented towards a different sphere of meaning where we find organic and non-GMO products.

These factors have had a notable affect on families' consumption habits, with a further slowdown over the course of 2011 caused by the decline in available income and the investment losses suffered following the turbulence of the financial markets. In order to maintain their spending levels, therefore, Italians have had to keep making selective consumption decisions oriented towards the search for low-cost products and distribution channels and also a reduction in wastage.

In this climate of economic uncertainty, even the brand, one of the foundation stones marketing has always built its success on, appears unsteady. In current times, consumption is guided above all by an assessment of cost and much less by brand faithfulness (Bosio *et al.,* 2010)[2].

Will brands come out of the economic crisis in a weakened state, or will they survive? To what extent is all of this backed up by our research?

We are now going to present the relationship between the crisis and brand faithfulness in Italy over the three-year period 2009-2011, with an analysis in particular of:

1. The consumption dynamics (*In your family, who, according to gender, made the decisions about groceries, clothing and footwear, home furnishings and technological goods – Question no. 3; When you choose an outlet for your day-to-day purchases, what importance do you attribute to the following characteristics?- Question no. 6;*
2. Brand as a value (*When you choose to purchase a product, do you pay most attention to? – Question no. 14);*
3. Brand faithfulness with regard to the various retail sectors (*Would you define yourself as someone who…? –* Question no. 5; *Regarding the brands of the products you personally purchase in the following retail sectors, would you define yourself as? – Question no.13*).

1. Consumption dynamics

As far as consumption dynamics and the decision-making process[3] are concerned, women are the ones who make purchases independently, especially as regards food (77.1% in 2009; 75.7% in 2010; 74.5% in 2011), medicines and personal hygiene products (75.7%, 74.7% and 73.4%).

The only category of goods where we can see a greater involvement on the part of men is in the hi-tech sector. In fact, the data show that, although there is a high percentage of women who purchase mobile phones, computers, household appliances and so on independently (40% in 2009, 40,1% in 2010, 40.9% in 2011), in this area men have growing levels of initiative and decision-making powers (60% in 2009, 59.9% in 2010, 59.1% in 2011).

This fact is further confirmed by the percentages of women who stated that they take care of purchasing technological goods together with their partners (59.5% in 2009, 62.3% in 2010, 57.9% in 2011. Indeed, these percentages are higher than the same option for the other categories of goods.[4]

Examining the three years in question (fig. 1), we can observe a common trend running through all the categories of goods: a slight dip in the involvement women in the purchase of these products, leading to greater responsibility for men: in both these factors it appears that there are no particular distinctions to be made based on age.

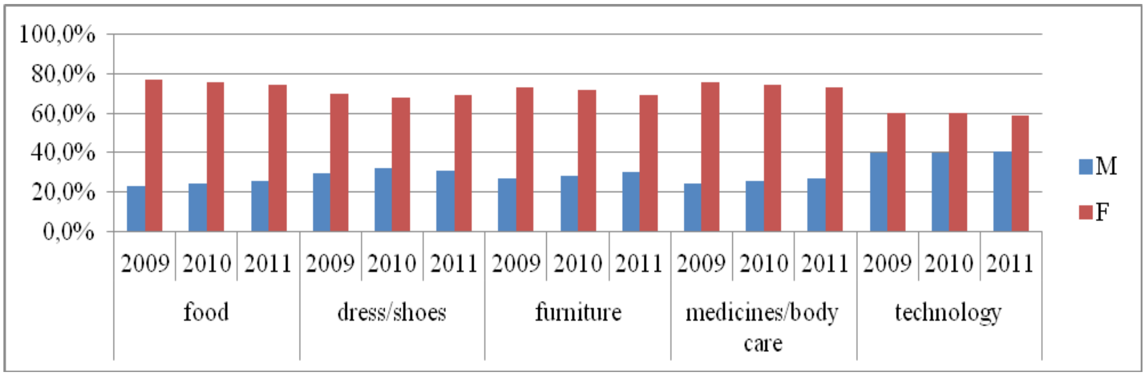
The men who state that they autonomously take care of the family shopping are above all (not unsurprisingly) men who live alone (around 40%), who have a high level of education (from high school diploma to postgraduate level) and who work in offices (mainly in the public sector) or are self-employed.

[2]http://www.professionisti24.ilsole24ore.com/art/Professionisti24/Management/2009/12/MANAGEMENT_CONSUMI.shtml?uuid=2065f5ac-ee45-11de-8af1-d15abd51a4ad&type=Libero. Looked up on 20 June 2012.

[3] More specifically, question no 3: *In your family, who, according to gender, made the decisions about groceries, clothing and footwear, home furnishings and technological goods?*

[4] Only the figure concerning the purchase of furnishings comes close. 52.2% (2009), 43.8% (2010), 43.3% (2010) of women state that they take care of purchasing furniture, ornaments and other items for the home together with their partners.

Fig. 1 - In your family, who, according to gender, made the decisions about groceries, clothing and footwear, home furnishings and technological goods in the three-year period 2009-2010-2011



Regarding the choice of outlet for day-to-day purchases (*When you choose an outlet for your day-to-day purchases, what importance do you attribute to the following characteristics*? (Question no. 6), the interviewees were asked to give a score from 1 (no importance) to 10 (utmost importance) to the following factors:

1. Quality of the product;
2. Low prices;
3. Good quality-price ratio;
4. Wide assortment of products;
5. Proximity of shops to the interviewees' homes;
6. Trusting relationship with shopkeepers;
7. Politeness of shopkeepers;
8. Ease of travel and parking;
9. Provision of extra services (for example home deliveries and such like).

In general, the data show that the interviewees held that the quality-price ratio is highly important, giving it a score greater than 8, with the quality of the products coming second. It is significant that the quality of the goods purchased takes on greater importance when coupled with a fair price.

The next factors in line (with a score greater than 7) were: wide assortment of products, low prices, ease of travel and parking and politeness of sales staff. We should, however, point out that in this area there have been changes over the years in question. While in 2009 and 2010 the interviewees assigned greater importance to there being a wide assortment of products (with a score of 7.9 in 2009 and 7.8 in 2010) than to low prices (7.7 in 2009 and 7.6 in 2010), the situation was reversed in 2011: in fact, the interviewees involved in the survey in 2011 assigned a higher score to low prices (7.8). This would seem to confirm that there is more focus on price than on the quality of the product and even the type of product. The three least important factors for consumers, which remained the same over the three years examined, are: having a trusting relationship with shopkeepers (6.8 over the three years), the proximity of shops to the interviewees' homes (6.5 in 2009, 6.6 in 2010 and 6.5 again in 2011) and the provision of extra services (for example home deliveries and such like) (5.7 in the three-year period).

The two main classes of factors that the interviewees hold to be most important when choosing one outlet over another emerged from the analysis:

1. The products sold (the characteristics of the goods sold): quality of the product, good quality-price ratio and low prices;
2. The sales outlet (the characteristics of the shop and shopkeeper: the politeness of shopkeepers/sales staff and the trust they generate and, lastly, the provision of extra services.

It should be pointed out that the three characteristics with negligible importance have been discarded for our analysis.[5]

Regarding gender, the figures show interestingly different ways of assessing certain aspects of goods and sales outlets. Women assign a much higher score to the characteristics of the shop than to the goods sold; therefore, for example, it is more important to have a trusting relationship with the shopkeeper or to have extra services available than for the products to be high quality or low cost. This aspect is the opposite in the case of men, who assign very little importance to the characteristics of the shop but show themselves to be more interested in the characteristics of the products sold.

In line with the greater responsibility and greater involvement of men in the family shopping (as mentioned above), in 2011 the percentage of males that assigned importance to the extra services offered by the outlet and to their relationship with the shopkeeper increased.

Taking into consideration the evaluation expressed by the interviewees (from 1 no importance to 10 utmost importance) and the two classes of factors (products sold and sales outlet) that emerged, in particular regarding gender, we present the following figures.

In the ‘products sold’ category (including quality of the product, low-cost products and good quality-price ratio) (Table 1).

Table 1: When you choose an outlet for your day-to-day purchases, what importance do you attribute to the following characteristics?- the products sold

GOODS		**2009**		**2010**		**2011**	
		M	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**
Quality of the product	*1-2*	36.7	**63.3**	22.7	**77.3**	**59.3**	40.7
	3-4	47.4	52.6	**62.5**	37.5	35.3	**64.7**
	5-6	40.5	**59.5**	44.7	55.3	50.9	49.1
	7-8	**50.5**	49.5	51.9	48.1	53.6	46.4
	9-10	47.2	52.8	45.4	**54.6**	45.3	54.7
Low prices	*1-2*	41.2	**58.8**	**60.9**	39.1	**65.5**	34.5
	3-4	**63**	37	45.3	**54.7**	**56.8**	43.2
	5-6	48.8	51.2	51.2	48.8	52.2	47.8
	7-8	52.5	47.5	49.3	50.7	50.8	49.2
	9-10	40.8	**59.2**	43.5	**56.5**	44.2	**55.8**
Good quality-price ratio	*1-2*	29.2	**70.8**	33.3	**66.7**	**58.3**	41.7
	3-4	50	50	**54.2**	45.8	60	40
	5-6	43.3	56.7	45.5	54.5	52.6	47.4
	7-8	**51.2**	48.8	50.2	49.8	49.2	50.8
	9-10	46.8	53.2	46.7	53.3	48.1	**50.9**

[5] Wide assortment of products, the proximity of shops to the interviewees’ homes and ease of travel and parking.

It is interesting to note an unusual attitude among the women interviewed, some of whom attribute very little importance to these factors while others, on the contrary, consider them to be very important and assign them a high score. The *good quality-price ratio* factor deserves a special mention, as in former years it was not a particularly important characteristic for women but became a little more so in 2011. Men, on the other hand, displayed an opposite tendency, assigning a progressively lower score to this factor over the years.

In the 'sales outlet' category (which, on the other hand, includes the relationship with the shopkeeper and the politeness of sales staff and lastly the provision of extra services), the situation emerges as follows (Table 2):

Table 2: When you choose an outlet for your day-to-day purchases, what importance do you attribute to the following characteristics?- the sales outlet

SHOP		**2009**		**2010**		**2011**	
		M	**F**	**M**	**F**	**M**	**F**
Trusting relationship with shopkeepers	*1-2*	**63.7**	36.3	**64.6**	35.4	**63**	37
	3-4	**55**	45	53.9	46.1	**57.4**	42.6
	5-6	49	51	53.4	46.6	50.2	49.8
	7-8	45	**55**	43.3	**56.7**	45.5	**54.5**
	9-10	44.4	**55.6**	43	**57**	47.1	**52.9**
Politeness of shopkeepers	*1-2*	**68.2**	31.8	**59.1**	40.9	**64.3**	35.7
	3-4	**54.5**	45.5	**57**	43	**54.1**	45.9
	5-6	49.1	50.9	49.2	50.8	51.7	48.3
	7-8	48.2	51.8	48.1	51.9	47.4	52.6
	9-10	43	**57**	43.6	**56.4**	46.8	**53.2**
Provision of extra services	*1-2*	**57.6**	42.4	**54.9**	45.1	**56.2**	43.8
	3-4	**55.1**	44.9	51.9	48.1	50.2	49.8
	5-6	44.9	**55.1**	47.6	52.4	51.2	48.8
	7-8	47.1	**52.9**	46	**54**	43.4	**56.6**
	9-10	37.8	52.3	39.4	**60.6**	46	**54**

Moreover, this aspect has grown in importance in recent years. Indeed, in 2009, more than half of those who gave a score of 9-10 for the *low prices* factor (63.5%) were worried/very worried about the family's finances. In the 2011 survey, this percentage had risen as far as 76%. As we stated above, the *good quality-price ratio* factor regarding goods initially had less importance than low prices.

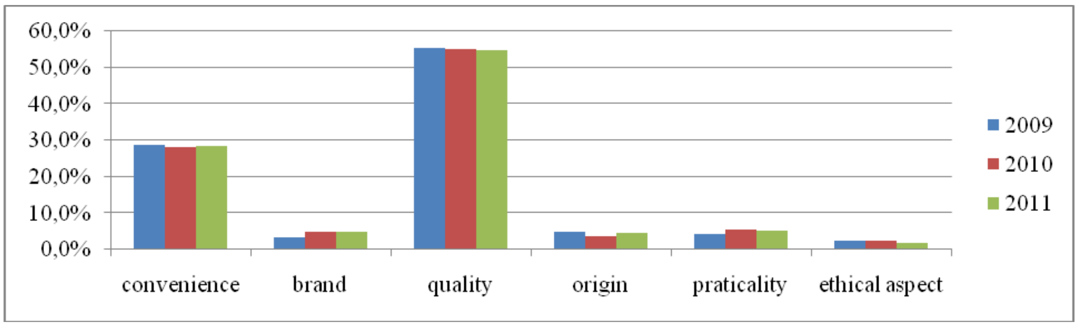
If we analyze this factor in relation to the levels of worry about the family's finances, 53.4% of those who stated they were worried gave this aspect a score of 9-10 in 2009, while 2011 saw a significant rise bringing the figure to 70.3%.

2. Brand as a value

On the basis of what criteria from those given in the list,

1. Budget prices;
2. The brand;
3. The quality;
4. Origin of the product
5. Ease of consumption/use;
6. Ethical factors (whether the manufacturer is environmentally friendly), do consumers choose one product over another? What do consumers focus most closely on?

Fig. 2 - When you choose to purchase a product, do you pay most attention to?/2009, 2010, 2011



Quality is the principal criterion for choosing products. In fact, in 2009, 55.3% of those interviewed declared that they assessed most carefully the quality of the product they were buying. This factor remained the number one criterion over the years in question, with only a very slight fall (0.4 percentage points).

The consumers interviewed look for quality regardless of brand, a fact that underlines that there is not necessarily a direct relationship between quality and brand.

In our study, the second most important criterion for choosing products was low prices, although it came a distant second at 28.9% (in 2009). Again this factor displays a slight decrease over the period, with 28.5% stating that they paid attention to prices in 2011. This confirms the situation illustrated in the previous paragraph: quality and price are the most important factors in the choice of shops (question no. 6) and products (question no. 14).

Indeed, according to *TNS Italia*, concerning the quality-price ratio and brands, people who purchase products in the mid-high price brackets seem to look for quality: these products generate more trust than low-cost products do.[6]

From the same *TNS Italia* study, we can see that the strength of consumers' relationships with different brands varies greatly according to their price bracket. In fact, while premium brands display high levels of faithfulness, low-cost products show notable variations from country to country and, in Italy[7] for example, the levels of attachment to these brands is lower than the average of the other European countries analyzed (Italy 12%, overall average 20%). For low-cost products, price is always a significant factor in establishing brand faithfulness. The consumers who consistently purchase low-cost brands described the products as "helpful in difficult times" (26%) and "important because they cut prices" (25%), while 3% and 5% of consumers respectively showed no attachment to these brands. In the light of cost-cutting policies, therefore, low-cost brands display good potential for sales.

[6] http://www.mark-up.it/articoli/0,1254,41_ART_3940,00.html. Looked up on 20 June 2012

[7] Likewise in France and Great Britain

Continuing our analysis of the figures that emerged from our survey, we can observe that ethical issues and the environmentally friendliness of the producer is the criterion given the lowest ranking in our list (chosen by 2.5% of interviewees in 2009 and 1.8% in 2011); the intervening places show some changes over the three years.

While in 2009 interviewees seemed to place importance on, in order: origin of the product and practicality (4.8%) and, lastly, brand (4.8%), in 2010 and 2011 the ease of use of the product held sway over the other criteria (accounting for 5.4% in 2010 and 5.2% in 2011), followed by brand (4.8 in 2010 and 2011) and lastly the origin of the product (3.7% in 2010 and 4.6%, in 2011) which therefore fell to the last place in the table.

If it is true that ten years ago there was a marked decrease in brand faithfulness (Fabris, Minestroni, 2004; Fabris, 2010), that trend today seems to be picking up slightly, at least in part due to different consumer attitudes and economic change. Our study confirms this trend.

Over the course of the three surveys, while the ethical dimension (Secondulfo, 2012) suffered the greatest fall in importance (about one percentage points), the factor that displayed the greatest rise was brand (an increase of 1.5 percentage points in 2011).

As far as gender is concerned, brand was the first thing men look for when making their purchases, followed by the inherent quality of the product. For women, on the other hand, price was the most important issue, followed by the origin of the goods and ease of use.

When it comes to men, while brand was confirmed as an important factor when choosing products, quality was replaced by ethical concerns (which became more important than brand in 2011) and ease of use. As for women, on the other hand, not only was low prices confirmed as the number one criterion, but ease of use came a very distant second.

3. Faithful, unfaithful and promiscuous

We use the term brand faithfulness in relation to the frequency with which a consumer re-purchases the same brand after their first experience as consumers of it (Knox et Walter, 2001; Dalli, Romani, 2003; Fabris, Minestroni, 2004; Fabris, 2010). Brand disloyalty, on the other hand, is described as the result of a consumer's choice between two or three different brands based on factors relating to the ease with which it can be found, the consumer's mood at the moment or a particular advertising campaign or promotion.

In response to question 5, *Would you define yourself as someone who…*, three different consumer profiles emerged:

- The loyal: always buy the same types of products and even the same brands;
- The promiscuous: love to try new things at times;
- The disloyal: always buy different things and/or brands.

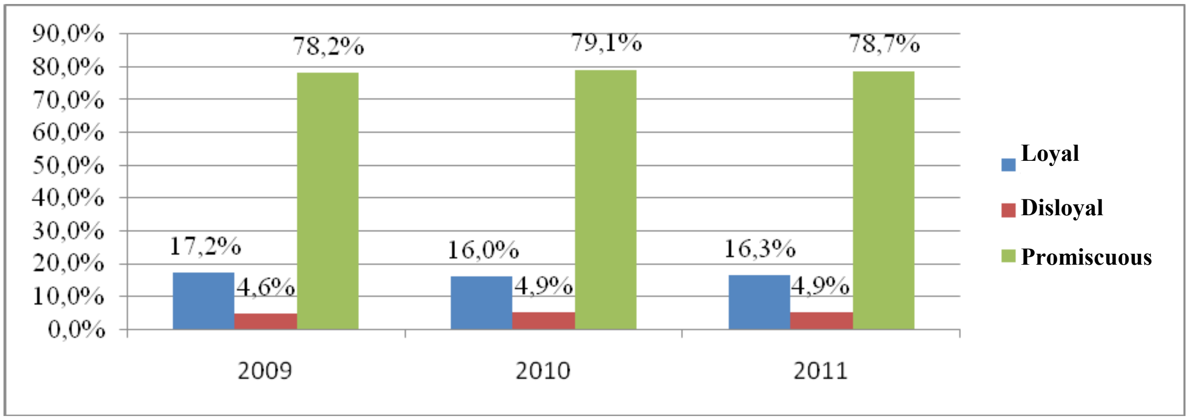
The majority of the families involved in the survey love to try new things at times 78.2% in 2009; 79.1% in 2010; 78.7% in 2011). This attitude has become more prevalent over the years and is further confirmed by the percentages in the opposite category: in fact, only 17.2% (2009), 16% (2010) and 16.3% (2011) declared they always buy the same products and the same brands (fig. 3).

Curiosity and desire for change is above all a female characteristic. Indeed, in the 2009 survey, 54.3% of women stated that they always bought new products and brands and 53.2% that they loved changing. Men, conversely, are somewhat less inclined to change products: in the same 2009 survey, 52% of men declared that they always bought the same types of products and the same brands.

While the traditionalist attitudes and brand faithfulness of the men interviewed saw a significant rise over the period concerned – in 2010 the men who stated that they did not want to change their consumption habits amounted to 56.1% of those interviewed and in 2011 this figure rose to 58.5% – it is interesting to note that the same increase cannot be seen concerning the women's desire for novelty. In 2010, 57.1% of the women interviewed stated that they always bought new products/brands and

53.7% that that liked trying different products, but in 2011 there was a fall in these percentages. In the former category, the figure dropped from 57.1% to 55.6% and in the latter from 53.7% to 52.8% .

Fig. 3 – Loyal, disloyal and promiscuous: 2009, 2010, 2011



The more traditionalist women are the most mature (aged 65 or over) and with only elementary schooling, while those who tend to change products the most are aged between 35 and 54 and have a high level of education (university and postgraduate qualifications).

Furthermore, the women who always change products and brands are those who define themselves as worried about their family finances: in fact, this group accounted for 70.6% of those who did not display loyalty in their purchases in 2009, 73.2% in 2010 and 83.7% in 2011. Moreover, these same women assigned a high score (7-10) to the *low prices* factor and therefore hold that this characteristic is extremely important in the choice of sales outlet (Question no. 6).

The data presented jointly by FIPE (federation of catering and entertainment businesses) and *Confcommercio* (union of retailers) in a 2012 study on the eating habits of Italians in the current time of crisis show that, in general and above all among young people, loyalty to brands or to the local shopkeeper is weak, while there is a pronounced tendency to look for purchase options that focus on saving, such as collective buying or making purchases online whenever it is economically advantageous.[8]

This situation is confirmed by *Collesei (2011)*, which highlights the fact that in recent years it has been above all young people who have modified their consumption patterns. This reinforces the idea that today's consumer, especially when young, gets tired of the repetitiveness of their daily purchases and aims to find new sensations by trying new brands that exploit different values.

Our analysis of the data gathered in our study confirms this particular dynamicity in young people's consumption habits. In fact, it is above all young people (in our study those under 34 years of age) who state that they want to buy new things or always purchase different things and/or brands, a tendency that was particularly marked in 2011, accounting for 46.4% of those interviewed between 25-34 years of age.

3.1 Loyalty and retail sectors

[8] http://www.giornalettismo.com/archives/205757/se-la-crisi-si-mangia-la-spesa-italiana/ Looked up on 20 June 2012

According to the data presented in a study made by *Coldiretti* (union of farmers), even during the sales this year there was a drop of around 25-30%[9] in buyers. This can be put down to the fact that, in times of crisis, Italians prioritize their spending and the sector that is hit hardest is clothing: one out of two Italians have cut down on purchases of new clothes. In fact, in 2011, the women's clothing sector (usually the most dynamic) recorded its biggest fall in the autumn-winter 2011 season.[10]

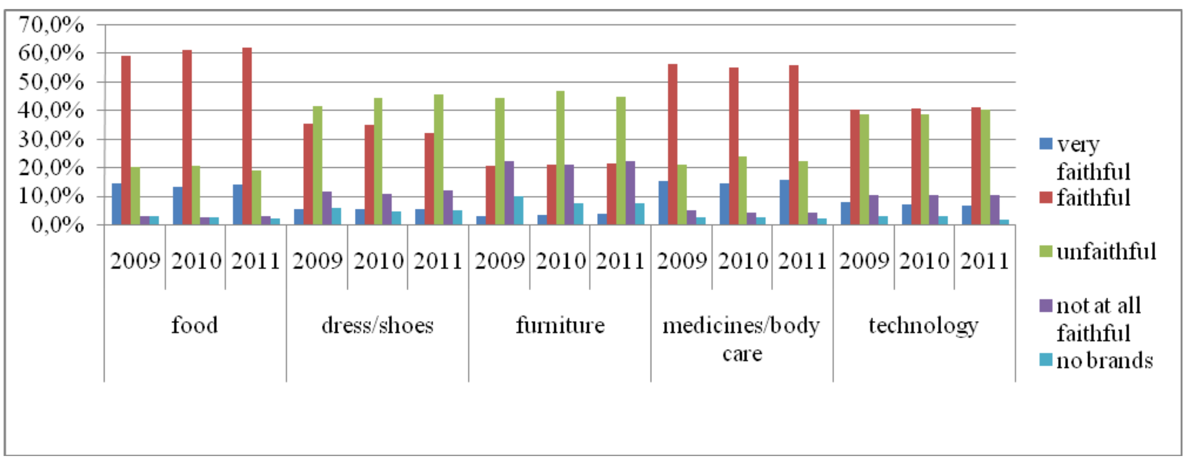
As far as the leisure and catering sectors are concerned, figures show a decrease of seven billion Euro for home-cooked meals and over a billion for those consumed outside the home over the past five years, a drastic cut in one of the few expenses that can be squeezed. While all the more or less obligatory expenses continue to rise, Italians – whether eating out or at home – are spending less and less: "The crisis is reinforcing a pattern that had already been forming for some time, due in large part to new lifestyles: people choose pasta and rice over meat and fish, snack foods are on the rise and overall they spend around 5 Euro a day on food eaten at home."[11]

Therefore we are witnessing a progressive shift towards saving on food – strengthened by the current crisis – to the point where, while Italian families spend on average 20% of their total budget on food, "young" families barely arrive at 14%.[12]

As far as brand faithfulness in the various retail sectors (food, clothing and footwear, home furnishings, medicines and toiletries/personal hygiene products, and technological goods: electrical appliances, computers/cell phones/televisions, etc.) is concerned, the figures obtained in our study confirm this situation.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of frequencies (*Regarding the brands of the products you personally purchase in the following retail sectors, would you define yourself as…?* 1.Very loyal, 2. Loyal, 3. Not very loyal, 4. Not at all loyal 5. I am not interested in brands – Q13) regarding the three years examined in the study (2009-2010-2011).

Figure 4 - *Regarding the brands of the products you personally purchase in the following retail sectors, would you define yourself as..(2009, 2010, 2011)*



[9] For example, just think that on the opening day of the sales in the two biggest Italian cities, Rome and Milan, the union of retailers *Confesercenti* estimated a drop in sales of 20-30% and 15% respectively.

[10] http://www.prismanews.net/lavoro/abbigliamento-2012-consumi-23-ma-il-web-e-a-60.html. Looked up on 25 July 2012

[11] http://www.giornalettismo.com/archives/205757/se-la-crisi-si-mangia-la-spesa-italiana/ Looked up on 20 June 2012

[12] http://www.giornalettismo.com/archives/205757/se-la-crisi-si-mangia-la-spesa-italiana/ Looked up on 20 June 2012

The graph shows that the consumers interviewed were particularly faithful (very faithful and faithful) in their food purchases, which display an upwards trend (from 74% in 2009 to 76% in 2011), and in medicines/toiletries (71.6% in 2009 and 2011, with a slight drop in 2010 to 69.6%). If we examine the percentages of those who declared they were *very faithful*, the highest percentage can be found in the medicines and toiletries sector (15.1% in 2009, 14.6% in 2010, 15.7% in 2011) than in food (14.5% in 2009, 13.2% in 2010, 14% in 2011).

On the contrary, the category of product consumers showed least loyalty towards (*not very faithful or not at all faithful*) was home furniture (from 66.9% in 2009 to 67.3% in 2011): the interviewees (9.7% in 2009) declared that in this area they either were not interested in brands or did not purchase brand-name products.

In line with the data presented in the *Coldiretti* study, consumers also displayed little faithfulness (*not very faithful or not at all faithful*) when it comes to clothing (from 53.2%n in 2009 to 57.6% in 2011) and technological goods (from 49.2% to 50.4%).

As already mentioned, Italians show no interest in brands or do not purchase brand-name products in the field of interior decoration (9.7% in 2009, 7.5% in 2010 and 7.6% in 2011) and clothing (5.8% in 2009, 4.7% in 2010, 4.9% in 2011).

Despite the fact that, as already mentioned, women seem to be more willing to change than men, medicines constitute the retail category where women display the greatest propensity to remain faithful to brands. In 2009, 56.5% of the women interviewed declared they were *very faithful*; this figure dropped in 2011, but only slightly: to 53%.

4. Conclusions

Purchases for the family are mainly the woman's responsibility, although in recent years we have seen greater involvement from men in this area.

The most important factor when making purchases is the quality-price ratio, but at this current time of economic crisis consumers look first and foremost for low prices, regardless of quality.

In this part of the study, three consumer profiles (Dalli, Romani, 2003; Fabris, Minestroni, 2004; Fabris, 2010) emerged with regard to brand faithfulness:

1. The faithful, who buy the same products and same brands;
2. The unfaithful, who change continuously;
3. The promiscuous, who also like to try new things and are not necessarily faithful to a single brand.

Brand faithfulness is above all a male characteristic found within a consumption dynamic in which the sampled males use the brand as their main reason for choosing one product over another.

It is the women, on the contrary, who like to change products and brands continually and when choosing a sales outlet also take into account how easy it is to reach and how polite the sales staff are – factors that are much less important for men.

Young consumers appear the most dynamic and willing to change, while the more mature consumers assert that they prefer not to change the products or brands purchased. When choosing a product, the 'unfaithful' focus above all on the origin of the product, while the promiscuous give more importance to the quality of the product; these choices, therefore, suggest a dynamic attitude towards purchases where brand is not a vital element. On the contrary, those who are faithful to a brand admit that they find the brand of a product an extremely important element in choosing to buy it. For this category of consumers, this aspect has nearly double the importance of the other characteristics.

As already mentioned, regarding brands, the sector in which consumers in general show the strongest tendency towards change is home furniture, a choice that, together with clothing, can be found across all three profiles but is most evident in the consumption attitudes of those who declared themselves to be unfaithful to brands.

Not surprisingly, the consumers displaying little or no brand faithfulness confirm a consumption pattern oriented towards continual change, with a sole exception: the food sector, which appears to be the only category where consumers display a certain level of brand faithfulness.

In fact, in accordance with the results presented by *Collesei* (2011), 'faithful' consumers declare they follow this pattern for every kind of product purchased, but especially when it comes to food, medicines/toiletries and personal hygiene products.

As we have already mentioned, all three consumer profiles on average hold that the price-quality ratio is very important, therefore what we can see is that consumers do not perceive a relationship between quality and brand. Indeed, our results confirm that brand is not perceived as a guarantee of quality by consumers. In the midst of a crisis, consumers do not seem very willing to grant unconditional faithfulness to brands, but rather consider quality as a characteristic of its own and, along with price incentives, an important aspect to assess when making purchases, regardless of brand.

As further proof of this, at this time of crisis those who state that they are unfaithful to brands and tend to change are very worried about their financial situations.

Therefore, we can say that in the midst of economic difficulties, consumers react by looking for the cheapest products and not necessarily caring about the brand.

Consumption is piloted by an assessment that focuses more heavily on costs than on brand faithfulness. As a result, manufacturers are now faced with the need to change strategy and establish new models for loyalizing and involving consumers (Lipovetsky, 2010; Secondulfo, 2012).[13]

However, it would be a serious mistake for brands to think that just because the country is in recession they must automatically cut their prices. Consumers continue to spend their money anyway and at least those who purchase products in the mid-high price brackets expect brands to live up to their usual standards concerning the aspects they have always perceived in them, such as quality and reliability. Many shoppers are tired of being bombarded with advertising and publicity and, although price will always be a factor in the choice of product to purchase, the brands that want to build up faithfulness in the future will have to present consumers with other benefits as well as good prices (Fabris. Minestroni, 2004; Fabris, 2010).[14]

While on the one hand manufacturers and brands try to loyalize customers by focusing on special offers and savings, on the other hand distributors can get to know their customers better and better in order to respond promptly to their needs, even in times of crisis (Viviani, 2012; Lipovetsky, 2010).

As brand identity is not a closed dimension, but is subject to a continuous dynamism, it creates a multitude of meanings. At a time when the economic crisis has a strong effect on consumption patterns, it is important for brands to find ways to renew themselves without losing their focus on consumers.

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[14]http://www.mark-up.it/articoli/0,1254,41_ART_3940,00.html. However, to get through the crisis, shops and manufacturers do try to loyalize customers, mainly by promoting cards that loyalize shoppers to discounts but not much to brands. These cards, if they are managed well, can be useful to companies for gathering information and to consumers trying to make savings, therefore can help support critical and not simply 'cheap' consumption. In the last year, points collection programmes have had a growing influence on the world of consumption: the Esselunga supermarket (27 supermarkets in Milan, 89 in the Lombardy region) has distributed almost 1.4 million rewards to customers, obtained by collecting points on their Fidaty loyalty cards (launched in Milan).).http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2012/05/04/la-crisi-rilancia-le-tessere-fedelta.html. Looked up on 20 June 2012

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